DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 051 JC 930 438

AUTHOR Price, Linda A.
TITLE Characteristics of Early Student Dropouts at Allegany Community College and Recommendations for Early Intervention.
INSTITUTION Allegany Community Coll., Cumberland, Md.
PUB DATE Jun 93
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Persistence; Community Colleges; Dropout Prevention; Dropout Research; *Dropouts; Early Intervention; Nontraditional Students; Program Development; *School Holding Power; *Student Behavior; *Student Characteristics; Student Employment; Student Participation; *Student School Relationship; Teacher Student Relationship; Two Year Colleges; *Two Year College Students
IDENTIFIERS *Allegany Community College MD

ABSTRACT

In an effort to develop early intervention strategies to increase student persistence, a study was conducted at Allegany Community College (ACC) in Cumberland, Maryland, of the common characteristics of withdrawing students. Student records were examined for the 84 students (out of a total of 2,999 enrolled) who withdrew in the first 3 weeks of fall 1992, and the 88 students (out of a total of 2,810) who withdrew in the first 3 weeks of spring 1993. A profile of all 172 withdrawing students included the following information: 62% were single; 97% were white; 66% were female; 72% were of non-traditional college age; 74% were unemployed; 63% attended college on a part-time basis; 46% had attended ACC the previous semester; 65% did not require developmental coursework; and 52% were from "non-degree" and general studies career interest areas. Based on this profile combined with a review of the literature suggesting that greater involvement in campus activities, closer affiliation with faculty members, and on-campus employment were associated with increased student retention, the following intervention strategies were proposed: (1) establish a women's center to provide support to non-traditional, female students; (2) conduct a freshman seminar to promote supportive relationships among students and student-faculty interaction; (3) create college funded work-study for on-campus employment; (4) establish a faculty development program; (5) create additional student organizations; and (6) establish a freshman orientation program. (Contains 13 references.) (PAA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 361 051

RESEARCH REPORT

CHARACTERISTICS OF EARLY STUDENT DROPOUTS AT ALLEGANY COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EARLY INTERVENTION

Submitted
by

Linda A. Price, Director
Recruitment and Enrollment Management
Allegany Community College
Cumberland, MD

June, 1993

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

L.A. Price

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

JC 930 438

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ABSTRACT

With the recognition of declining demographics and an increased societal need for post-secondary education, student retention has become a very important issue for college officials in recent years.

For Allegany Community College, early student withdraws within the first three weeks of the semester had become an area of interest. Why were some students applying, registering, attending class, but then dropping out so early in the semester? The purpose of this study, therefore, was to determine the common characteristics possessed by students who withdrew within the first three weeks and what early intervention strategies could be developed to increase student persistence.

This study involved the collection of demographic data on students enrolled in credit programs at Allegany Community College in the Fall 1992 and Spring 1993 semesters. The results indicated that the majority of the students who withdrew were single, white, non-traditional, unemployed, females, not requiring developmental coursework. The majority were also enrolled in non-degree or general studies programs. Early intervention strategies recommended included the establishment of a Women's Center, the implementation of a freshman seminar, the creation of a college-funded work study program, the establishment of a faculty development program, the establishment of an orientation program, and the creation of additional student organizations, all targeted to the specific group of students who have the characteristics of the student who is most likely to dropout during the first three weeks of classes.

INTRODUCTION

Student retention has become a very important issue for college officials in recent years for both economic and social reasons. More institutions are realizing that, with declining demographics and an increased societal need for post-secondary education, it is just as important to keep students in college as it is to get them there in the first place. Generally speaking, it is the two-year public college that has experienced the highest and most sustained attrition rate. (Jones, 1986).

In reviewing the enrollment and retention data of students at Allegany Community College, it had been noted that a number of students who drop out do so within the first three weeks. These are students who had obviously given some thought to a college education, spent the time and effort to apply and register and in many cases actually attended classes, but for some reason chose to drop out at the very first part of the semester. It was this group of students about which the College wanted to obtain more information in an effort to determine if they possessed common demographic characteristics. Once this information was collected, the college would be able to institute early intervention efforts that could increase the persistence factor, thus decreasing early-semester dropouts.

The purpose of the study was to determine what common characteristics are possessed by students who withdrew after the first, second, or third week of classes at Allegany Community College so that strategies could be developed which would encourage those students to persist at the institution.

Since this study was limited to those students who withdrew from Allegany Community College during the first three weeks of the semester, it does not address academic performance as a variable. Rather, it examines variables that exist before academic performance is measured and about which the institution would like to know more.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature on the topic of student retention in higher education is quite extensive. The majority of the studies approach the topic in ways that can be categorized as follows: (1) student demographic information -- gender, age, race, marital status; (2) academic data -- high school GPA, placement test scores, developmental coursework; or (3) non-cognitive factors -- motivation, perceptions, attitude. Attempts have been made to link these three categories in efforts to develop retention models. (Brooks-Leonard, 1991).

Other research suggests that it is both leadership and accountability that are the keys to effective student retention. Colleges need to be committed to the goal of student achievement and thus allocate the authority and the necessary resources for its attainment. As part of the leadership role, colleges must incorporate quality instructional programs and emphasize support systems aimed at improving student-faculty interaction in order for retention programs to be effective. (Van Allen, 1988).

Some studies identify the reasons students give for dropping out. Research has shown, however, that students tend not to be honest when pressed to give reasons for their choice to withdraw, especially if

these reasons may be regarded by others as evidence of failure. (Astin, 1975) (Bean and Metzner, 1985). However, according to Noel and Levitz (1992), reasons given by students vary as to why they drop out. Some of the reasons given are lack of financial resources; personal reasons, i.e., health, divorce, death in the family; lack of time/energy, or some combination of the three. Reasons for withdrawing are somewhat related to academic underpreparedness. However, ACT scores, class rank, and other types of success indicators are not predictors of dropout proneness. A popular myth is that dropouts are flunkouts. In a study of 4,915 students in 46 institutions conducted by the ACE-UCLA Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), of the 1493 students who did not return the following semester, 20.1% had GPAs between 3.0 and 4.0, and 17.1% had GPAs between 2.5 and 3.0. Noel and Levitz further state that individual differences in motive, perceptions, and attitude are all key in determining a student's decision to persist. (Noel and Levitz, 1992).

Still, further research suggests that retention depends heavily on student involvement with campus/program activities. Studies show that the more time and effort students apply to their school work, the greater will be their persistence in college. (Friedlander and McDougall, 1991) (Billson and Brooks, 1987) (Astin, 1975). Allowing students to work on campus yields higher retention rates, and recent research supports the benefits of campus employment: working does not necessarily lower grades; grades improve when the job is related to a

student's academic program; the more hours the student works in a campus job the more likely the student is to persist; and former student workers earn more than their counterparts the first five years after graduation (Stern and Nakata, 1991). It has been found that students who are not employed are less likely to persist in college than those employed on a part-time basis (Bers and Smith, 1991). However, the number of hours students spend in off-campus jobs is negatively associated with persistence. These students tend to take jobs out of choice rather than necessity in order to buy luxury items such as cars, CDs, and clothing, as opposed to saving for college. Only ten percent of working high schools seniors surveyed in 1991 said they were saving for college (Waldman and Springen, 1992).

The degree of certainty regarding the academic program selected by the student is positively related to persistence (Bean and Metzner, 1985). The more committed students are to the goal of completing a program, the more likely they are to persist, particularly at two-year colleges (Heath, Skok, McLaughlin, 1991). It is common practice for students to change their major several times throughout their college career and it is estimated that of all students entering college in any given academic year, approximately 17% will not enroll in a degree credit program (Tinto, 1987). One possible reason for this is the uncertainty of which career to pursue. It is the non-degree, part-time student who is less likely than other students to complete a degree program (Tinto, 1987) (Bean and Metzner, 1985).

Voluntary withdrawal is a reflection of events that occur on campus after entering rather than what took place before. Students anticipating academic difficulties, experiencing social isolation, or feeling overwhelmed may choose to drop out very early in the semester, sometimes before the first grading period which is anywhere from 6-8 weeks into the semester. Departure this soon in the year does not allow one an opportunity to adjust to college demands (Tinto, 1987). Students experiencing "syllabus shock" within the first couple weeks, which is the overwhelming feeling that one will not be able to live up to the rigorous demands of classes as outlined in the syllabi of their courses, may choose to withdraw before they have given themselves a chance. It also may be more difficult for older students to readily admit their fears and lack of self-confidence and, therefore, they may be less willing to ask for assistance. Research shows that actions of faculty within the classroom are important to student persistence, as these actions influence student perceptions of the approachability of the faculty member. The more rewarding the interactions between student and faculty, the more likely the student is to persist and to develop socially and intellectually (Tinto, 1987).

The conclusion from a review of the literature on retention is that there is a very intricate interaction among many variables, both academic and non-academic, which determines attrition. Though institutions should learn from research and experiences of other colleges, it remains for each institution to determine for itself the

particular events which shape student departure from its own campus. Although retention is the desirable outcome of institutional efforts, it is the concern for the education of students that should serve as the guiding principle of actions that are taken (Jones, 1986). A synthesis of national retention studies, which identified trends concerning retention strategies, found that of all the academic and non-academic services identified that might reduce attrition, few had actually been attempted by many institutions; rather, institutions did not try anything other than advising and a few curricular changes. Most of the strategies implemented by colleges and universities were found to be ineffective. One reason for this was that individual causal factors were often singled out and academic retention activities were implemented, when in fact most students were not in academic difficulty. Also, the literature suggests that students in two-year colleges are four times more likely to drop out for non-academic reasons rather than academic ones. (Jones, 1986).

METHODOLOGY

The 5,809 subjects included in this study were all students enrolled in credit programs at Allegany Community College in the Fall 1992 and Spring 1993 semesters. Of the 2,999 students enrolled in the Fall of 1992, 1,700 were full-time students and 1,299 attended on a part-time basis. The 2,810 students enrolled in the Spring, 1993, consisted of 1,526 full-time and 1,284 part-time students. Both demographic and academic information were used for analysis.

Demographic information included age, employment status (full- or part-time), marital status, race, and gender; academic data included credit load (full- or part-time), enrollment status in developmental courses, registration status (first-time, current, or readmitted student), and program of study.

In order to collect these data, computer programs were written to access the student data base and, thereby, identify those persons who dropped out in Week 1, Week 2, or Week 3. Computer printouts with the data elements identified above were then requested after each of the first two weeks and after the third week of classes in the Fall, 1992.

For the Spring 1993 semester, data were collected for the first three weeks and computer printouts were generated in the same fashion as the Fall semester.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

A total of 84 students, out of the total 2,999 enrolled, withdrew during the first three weeks of the Fall 1992 semester. The profile of that student, based on the demographic and academic data collected, showed that the majority were single (65%), white (98%) females (71%) of non-traditional age (70%). The largest percentage of the students were attending for the first-time (44%), on a part-time basis (58%), were unemployed (74%), and did not require developmental coursework (57%). By academic program, the largest single group of students who withdrew were registered as "non-degree" (17%). A significant number (38%) were enrolled in various general studies career interest areas.

Also, it was noted that a relatively large percentage of students were traditional age (30%), had been registered on a full-time basis (41%), were married (34%), were required to take developmental coursework (42%), and had attended ACC the previous semester (38%) or some other point in time (17%).

The profile of the student who withdrew within those first three weeks of the Spring, 1993, semester was essentially the same as the Fall semester. The results showed that out of a total of 2810 students, 88 withdrew. The majority were single (57%), white (96%), females (60%) of non-traditional age (74%) who had attended ACC the previous semester (53%). The majority (68%) were attending college on a part-time basis, were unemployed (73%), and did not require developmental coursework (72%). The largest number of students who withdrew were registered as "non-degree" (22%), with a significant number (18%) withdrawing from general studies career interest programs. Essentially, the only difference between the student profiled in the Fall semester compared with the Spring semester was that in the Fall, the majority who dropped out were new students, as opposed to the Spring, when the majority were current students. Also, it was noted that a relatively large percentage of students were in the traditional age group (26%), had been registered on a full-time basis (31%), were married (42%), were developmental (27%), and were attending ACC for the first time (25%).

Of the total enrollment, 5,809, 172 withdrew within the first three weeks of both the Fall 1992 and Spring 1993 semesters. The profile of this student was as follows: single (62%), white (97%), female (66%), non-traditional (72%), unemployed (74%), attended college on a part-time basis (63%), attended ACC the previous semester (46%), and did not require developmental coursework (65%). The areas from which the greatest number of students withdrew (52%) were "non-degree" and general studies career interest areas.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The data indicate that there are discernible common characteristics that can be identified within the group of students who withdraw from Allegany Community College within the first three weeks of the semester. These students tend to be (1) single, (2) white, (3) female, (4) non-traditional, (5) unemployed, (6) part-time, (7) registered as current sutdents, (8) not requiring developmental coursework, and (9) enrolled in non-degree and general studies areas.

Consistent with findings in the literature that indicate that retention depends heavily on student involvement with campus/program activities is the fact that over half of the student dropouts were non-degree and general studies majors. Students within these categories at Allegany Community College are not a part of a group of curriculum or academic program majors and thus are not exposed to the group support dynamic. Such students may experience the social isolation factor that the literature indicates is negatively associated

with persistence. Also, these students are not closely affiliated with a faculty member who is responsible for the major but rather are either assigned a general advisor or acquire academic advice from the admissions/registration office. The literature points out that close association with a faculty member who has a keen interest in their success is an important factor in persistence. Further, the literature points out that the degree of certainty regarding the academic program selected by the student is positively related to persistence. This group of students exhibits uncertainty by selecting non-degree or general studies as their academic area.

It is also noted that the age category of the typical ACC dropout during the first three weeks of the semester is the older student, the student who is older than the traditional age of college students. The literature indicates that the non-traditional age student may have more difficulty with self-confidence and may be more hesitant to ask for help, fearing that such a request would indicate an inadequacy to pursue a college education. Such a student would also have a tendency to be more susceptible to the "syllabus shock" syndrome and the social isolation factor.

The typical ACC dropout in this study also is unemployed. The literature points out that employment, especially on-campus employment, is positively correlated to persistence, whereas unemployment is negatively associated with persistence.

Finally, as shown in the literature, the data indicate that the majority of dropouts are not students who lack the basic academic

skills to be successful in college coursework. The majority of dropouts in this study (65%) did not require developmental coursework as determined by standardized tests.

As indicated in the literature, most institutions create retention strategies which focus on changing or strengthening advising and curricula. For the most part, these strategies have been ineffective. It is also pointed out that it remains for each institution to determine for itself the particular efforts which shape student departure from its campus. Thus, in combining the information from the review of literature with the discernible characteristics as identified in this study, it is concluded that Allegany Community College should make efforts to impact positively on students displaying such characteristics.

The following recommendations for early intervention strategies are proposed:

1. Establish a Women's Center. Since many of the early dropouts at Allegany Community College are single, non-traditional, female students, it is recommended that a Women's Center be established to provide support in an effort to enhance academic success. Students in the targeted group would be made aware of the the existence of the Center through a personal letter mailed to them prior to the start of classes. In this way, students feeling overwhelmed with the start of classes and contemplating withdraw may seek the support of others in the Center before finalizing their decision.

2. Conduct a Freshman Seminar. The students identified in this study who are most susceptible to dropping out could benefit greatly from a course aimed at encouraging program selection, promoting supportive relationships among students, and developing student-faculty interaction. These students, most of whom enroll in non-degree programs, would be advised of program majors available, assisted in matching their needs to program offerings, assisted in examining their interests, abilities, and limitations, and provided with methods of improving and building on their individual goals. As the research suggests, the more committed students are to the goal of completing a program, the more likely they are to persist; therefore, the Freshmen Seminar would emphasize the affective component to help students identify skills and strategies necessary to achieve their short- and long-term goals.
3. Create College-funded work-study. An excellent way to enhance student persistence is by providing job opportunities for students on campus. As federal work-study funding is limited, the College would need to direct some of its resources to a program designed to employ students in on-campus work situations. Efforts should be made to increase both the number and type of on-campus jobs available to students, as the research shows that on-campus employment substantially increases the student's chances of finishing college.

4. Establish a Faculty Development Program. Faculty have proven to be one of the most critical elements in student retention. The most successful retention programs are ones in which the faculty seem to have strong humanistic skills. As indicated in the literature, helping the high risk student establish a linkage with the college through interactions with faculty is one of the most effective means of reducing attrition. Therefore, faculty development activities should be planned which would increase the awareness of the faculty role in student persistence.
5. Create Additional Student Organizations. As the literature shows, students who withdraw are generally academically able but socially isolated. Students who persist are more likely to have strong interactions with the institution's academic and social structure. Therefore, the institution should encourage the creation of clubs and organizations which reflect the common interests of students in the areas of both socialization and academics. Departmental clubs would encourage the student-faculty interaction essential to student persistence.
6. Establish an Orientation Program. A freshmen orientation program targeting the group of students identified in this study could be utilized to reduce attrition rates. The program would acquaint entrants with policies, procedures, personnel, services, and facilities, which would certainly help to reduce some of their fears, confusion, and first semester anxieties. Retention would be encouraged through increased realization of the student support systems and campus activities that exist.

7. Conduct Further Study. A similar study should be conducted after any of the above-listed recommendations are implemented to see if a difference was made in the persistence of the target student group. Also, it is recommended that the study include the collection of data regarding family responsibilities of the dropouts to see if such responsibilities are a characteristic in those who withdraw during the first three weeks.

REFERENCES

Astin, Alexander (1975). Preventing students from dropping out. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Bean, John P.,& Metzner, Barbara S. (1985, Winter). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. Review of Educational Research, 55 (4), 485-540.

Bers, Trudy H., & Smith, Kerry E. (1991). Persistence of community college students: the influence of student intent and academic and social integration. Research in Higher Education, 32 (5), 539-556.

Billson, Janet Mancini, & Brooks-Terry, Margaret (1987, Summer). A student retention model for higher education. College and University, 62 (4), 290-305.

Brooks-Leonard, Christine (1991). Demographic and academic factors associated with first-to-second term retention in a two-year college. Community/Junior College Quarterly of Research and Practice, 15 (1), 57-69.

Friedlander, Jack, and MacDougall, Jack (1991). Achieving student success through student involvement. Community College Review 20 (1), 20-28.

Heath, Peter L., Skok, Richard L., & McLaughlin, T.F. (1991). A proposed community college student retention model. College Student Journal, 25 (1), 506-14.

Jones, Stephen W. (1986, Fall). No magic required: reducing freshman attrition at the community college. Community College Review, 14 (2) 14-18.

Noel, Lee (1992, Winter). The student employment professional -- an emerging partner in student success and persistence. The Journal of Student Employment, 4 (1).

Noel, Lee & Levitz, Randi (1992, November). Presentation at Pennsylvania Aid Administrators seminar, Monroeville, PA.

Stern, David, & Nakata, Yoshi-fumi (1991, January/February). Paid employment among U.S. college students: trends, effects, and possible causes. Journal of Higher Education, 62 (1), 25-43.

Tinto, Vincent (1987). Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Van Allen, Georgia H. (1988, March). Retention: a commitment to student achievement. Journal of College Student Development, 29 (2), 163-165.